

Legislative Council Panel on Home Affairs
Legislative Council Panel on Welfare

Rice Distribution Events
at Yu Lan Festivals

PURPOSE

1. This paper informs Members of the assistance the Government has rendered in free rice distribution events held by the Yu Lan Festival organisations and the preliminary proposals of the Administration on the rice distribution events.

RICE DISTRIBUTION EVENTS

2. As in the past, there are over 60 rice distribution events in various districts throughout the territory this year. It is estimated that some 140,000 packets of rice, each weighing between 1 kg to 5 kg, have been distributed within the current year. Most of these events were organised in the Seventh Lunar Month by the Chiu Chow fraternity associations.

SUPPORT FROM THE GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS

3. Over the years, the Government departments have played an active role to facilitate the smooth implementation of the rice distribution events organised by district organisations. If notified of such events, the District Office under the Home Affairs Department would arrange pre-meetings with the organisers and relevant departments (including the Police, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department and the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department etc.) to discuss the logistic arrangements and safety measures prior to the events to ensure smooth implementation of the programme. The relevant departments would remind the organisers to carefully plan and manage the entire programme with particular regard to the following issues at the rice distribution events:

- (a) provide sufficient queuing areas as well as canopies, drinking water etc.;
- (b) recruit sufficient volunteers or solicit help from voluntary groups (e.g. Auxiliary Medical Services and Civil Aid Service) to provide additional support to maintain order;
- (c) establish close liaison with the Police to maintain law and order and ensure public safety during the event;
- (d) avoid having the participants to queue up for a long time to get the rice packets; and
- (e) devise a contingency plan in case of inclement weather.

Present Position

4. The Government is extremely concerned with the recent incidents that occurred at rice distribution events during the Yu Lan Festival where many elderly people had to queue up for a long time and where chaos had arisen while they were queuing up for the rice packets. The public generally agreed that the Government should exercise more stringent control over rice distribution events during the Yu Lan Festival in future or the Government should ban these events altogether.

5. The Home Affairs Bureau has recently carried out a telephone survey on the subject and interviewed more than 1200 people aged over 18. The interviewees (67%) generally agreed that the traditional rice distribution events should continue to be held in future. Of the interviewees who supported the continuation of these events, the majority (89%) of them considered changing the existing arrangement of distributing the “Blessed Rice” through a queuing system were necessary and amongst them, nearly 45% favoured distributing the rice to the homes of the elderly. Some also pointed out that the organisers should consider using “rice coupons” instead (28%) or distributing the rice at multiple locations using a coupon system (22%).

6. Yu Lan Festival is a traditional festival and the distribution

of “Blessed Rice” also has a long history. The Government respects the values of traditional festivals and would provide support when necessary to facilitate the smooth implementation of these events. The Home Affairs Bureau together with relevant Government departments (including the Home Affairs Department, Police, Leisure and Cultural Services Department and Social Welfare Department) have recently met with the organisers responsible for rice distribution during the Yu Lan Festival to discuss the feasible measures to improve on the current arrangements for distributing the “Blessed Rice”.

7. At the meeting held on the evening of 5 September, the Government has generally reached a consensus with the organisers and agreed that the distribution of “Blessed Rice” during the Yu Lan Festival is a tradition that should be maintained. However, there is a need for the mode of operation to be revised and enhanced. While respecting the maintenance of traditional customs, the organisers must also bear in mind the overarching principle of ensuring the safety of the elderly, and truly fulfilling the objective of benefitting the elderly population in the community. The organisers distributing “Blessed Rice” should hence need to introduce more effective measures to ensure the smooth implementation of the programme.

8. Currently, most of the rice distribution events would require the participants, who are predominantly elderly, to queue up for a long time. As the elderly people have a tendency to start queuing up overnight and are physically weak, we note that chaotic situations had occurred even with substantial provision of resources and support of the Police and the organisers. Because of the improvements in telecommunication and the ageing population, the number of people queuing up for the “Blessed Rice” during the Yu Lan Festival has been on the increase. It has also become a popular trend for the elderly people from various districts to participate in a rice distribution event.

9. In view of the above situation, we consider the Yu Lan Festival organisations should focus on avoiding the recurrence of chaotic situations, in particular, the congregation of large crowds during the distribution of “Blessed Rice”. The organisers should also consider measures which would obviate the need for the elderly to queue up overnight or outdoors, and to avoid situations which might easily lead to injuries of those receiving the “Blessed Rice”.

Way Forward

10. The Government would continue to discuss with the organisers holding the Yu Lan Festival events and the social welfare sector to actively explore effective improvement measures which will take into account the safety and welfare of the elderly during the rice distribution events.

Home Affairs Department
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